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Balancing supportive relationships and developing independence: An activity theory approach to understanding feedback in context for Master's students.

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Balancing supportive relationships and developing independence: An activity theory approach to understanding feedback in context for Master's students.

Master's students are expected to be self-regulating and independent learners. Dialogic feedback has been identified as one way of promoting such independence. There continues to be concern about the extent to which Master's students are achieving this level of functioning. This study aimed to identify feedback practices and contexts which facilitated student engagement and independence. Working with students as co-researchers, interviews were conducted with 27 Master's students from 3 programmes. Activity Theory was used as an analytical tool to generate understanding of feedback in the social context of each programme. Findings indicate there can be tension between factors which promote dialogical feedback and those which promote independence, and that active dialogic feedback with staff may limit student engagement with peer feedback.

Keywords: Master's students; postgraduate taught; dialogic feedback; independent learning

Introduction

An inclusive and active approach to learning and teaching calls for student agency, particularly at Master's level where there is an expectation of independent working. This paper reports on a qualitative, interview-based study which sought to explore connections between postgraduate taught students' experiences of assessment and feedback and their independence as learners. Our study builds on previous research which has largely been conducted with undergraduate students (Evans 2013). A key part of being an independent learner is students' capacity to exercise judgement in relation to their own academic work, with feedback as 'active dialog' widely understood as assisting in developing this skill (e.g. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Falchikov 2005)).

During the 'data familiarisation' stage of analysis, it became clear that the social context of the programme in which feedback occurred, in particular the relationships between staff and students, was an important factor. The importance of relationships in understanding learning experiences is highlighted by Cree, Christie and Tett (2016) who observed that relationships

are ‘the core of the learning experience for all students’ (2016: 96). A theme in the pedagogical relationships literature is the need to find a balance between support and ‘spoon-feeding’ (Devlin and O’Shea 2012; Sibii 2010). It seems that a challenge at Master’s level is to find ways of offering support through appropriate practices and relationships which at the same time develop independence. As our preliminary reading of the data suggested it was important when looking for ways to facilitate the development of independent learners, to consider both approaches to feedback and the social context of programmes, we decided to take an Activity Theory approach to further analysis.

The Postgraduate taught Context

The diverse postgraduate taught student population profile raises distinctive issues. The experiences of non-UK students have been the focus of research (e.g. Skyrme and McGee 2016). The phenomenon of ‘transition shock’ (Nelson, et al. 2006) can occur with any student moving into postgraduate study, but is particularly common amongst those moving between academic cultures or shifting disciplines. International students can also face ‘acculturative stress’ (Rice, Choi, Zhang, Moreros and Anderson 2012) as they negotiate the dynamic interaction between home and host cultures. In addition to international diversity in the postgraduate taught student population there is also diversity in modes of study. For example, whilst the number of part-time students is in overall decline, in 2017/8 they still accounted for 43.8% of postgraduate taught student enrolments (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2019). These students are often returners to study and many are managing their studies alongside work and other responsibilities (Tobbell and O’Donnell 2013).

Two programme level factors make the postgraduate taught sector worthy of study in its own right. The first is the variety in the kinds of programmes of study which are offered. The Quality Assurance Agency (2015) lists four: research; specialized or advanced study; professional or practice; and integrated. Each of these has different characteristics and intended audiences. The second is the challenge presented by the nature of Master's level study itself. This includes a lack of time for acculturation on one-year programmes (Coates and Dickinson 2012), the higher order thinking required (Brown 2014), greater expectations of independent, self-regulated learning at Master's level (Quality Assurance Agency 2010), and reports of unmanageable workloads contributing to student anxiety and stress (Leman 2018).

Dialogic Feedback

Feedback has long been considered to be a crucial component of learning within and beyond formal educational settings across different academic levels (Sadler 2010). A number of factors have been found to make feedback effective including: timeliness (Bailey and Garner 2010); helpfulness (Barker and Pinard 2014); specificity and depth (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002); clarity of purpose (Price, Handley, Price, Millar and O'Donovan 2010; Bloxham et al 2016); the credibility of the lecturer (Poulos and Mahony 2008; Ajjawi and Boud 2017), and the perceived sincerity of comments (To 2016). However, this search for the characteristics of effective feedback tends to conceptualise it as a commodity passed from markers to the student (Dunworth and Sanchez 2016; Ajjawi and Boud 2017). This sits in tension with research on effective assessment and feedback which supports the view of feedback as an active dialogic process (Nicol 2010) that enables students to become more independent, self-regulating learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) who are able to

make their own judgements about the quality of their work (Sadler 1985). Dawson et al (2019) note this transition towards feedback as an active sensemaking process undertaken by students. They identify feedback designs (using iterative / connected activities) that enable students to demonstrate improvement and identify peer feedback as also important. This active, dialogic approach is also clear in Carless and Boud's (2018) articulation of Assessment Literacy that identifies appreciating feedback, making judgements, managing affect and taking action as key features. While recognising feedback as dialogic also need to recognise that feedback back dialogue takes place in a wider context which can itself affect how students engage with learning and teaching (including assessment and feedback): feedback dialogue can be seen as a context within a wider context. It is therefore of interest to think not only about the effectiveness of dialogic feedback techniques but also how interaction / engagement at programme level might influence engagement. Students general motivation and interaction with assessment and feedback can be influenced by their perception of the wider contexts of relationships at programme-level (MacKay, Hughes, Marzetti, Lent and Rhind 2019).

We view feedback as not something 'done' to students or a commodity that has use value but is an active, social, process that helps facilitate student learning. Rather than something engaged with, feedback is also the act of engagement itself. Assessment then becomes a way of facilitating learning engagement as well as measuring learning (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013). Taking this perspective emphasizes the need to focus on the whole of the feedback cycle (Dunworth and Sanchez 2016) and highlights the importance of student engagement in this process (Carless 2015).

Although feedback dialogue can be conceptualised in technical rational terms it must also be understood in its social context (McConlogue 2015). Research on improving assessment and

feedback has tended to focus on individual understanding and performance in terms of how information is given or how building personal understanding can work. Nevertheless, feedback dialogue occurs within the specific culture, or ‘learning milieu’ of each programme of study (Boud and Molloy 2013). This includes the community of students and staff, the timescale of the programme, physical spaces associated with study on the programme, as well as any external professional community. Therefore, the dialogue is not isolated but occurs within a network of discourses and relationships. Active feedback engagement is likely to occur in a wider network on social relations at programme level. In this paper we are concerned with how this wider set of social relations connect with how students in the participating programmes seem to conceptualise and engage with feedback

Postgraduate Taught and Dialogic Feedback

The social context of Higher Education is challenging. Research consistently identifies staff complaints of a lack of time for engagement with students (Macleod, Barnes and Huttly 2019). The pressure of time combined with the presumed independence of postgraduate taught students (Quality Assurance Agency 2013) may shape relationships between postgraduate taught students and their tutors. This raises questions about the possibility of feedback as part of ‘an on-going relationship between teacher and student’ (Ajjawi and Boud 2017, 252), however there is a lack of research into this issue at postgraduate taught level.

Although postgraduate taught students are sometimes assumed to be ‘expert’, ready for advanced study from day one of their programme, this assumption has been challenged (Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit 2010). Indeed, as research on feedback suggests expertise is difficult to achieve with undergraduate students, by implication, postgraduate taught students

are unlikely to be expert learners when they begin Master's level study. The more active, dialogic approach to feedback is relevant in thinking about the *development* of 'expert' Master's students, because feedback as a dialogic process is said to help students build an understanding of how good their work is and how to improve it through self-regulation (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Our research set out to answer the question: How do different assessment and feedback practices influence Master's students' engagement with, and experience of learning and teaching?

Methodology

The research took place in a large Social Sciences Faculty offering 25 Master's programmes. The majority of the students were enrolled on full-time one year specialized/ advanced study MSc degrees. The project was internally funded by a competitive award scheme designed to support projects aimed at enhancing learning and teaching in the university. Students from a one-year full-time MSc programme were invited to apply to work as co-researchers on the study. Four students (authors 3 – 6) took part as co-researchers and carried out all the data collection. Their work on the project formed their MSc dissertations which were supervised by the first and second authors. Each had some flexibility in their research aim and design within parameters dictated by the overall aims of the project. Thus, the project can be understood as adopting a 'students as researchers' pedagogy (Walkington 2016).

Each student-researcher (S-R) was responsible for designing, carrying out and reporting their individual study. In addition to the data reported here, three S-Rs carried out interviews with staff and two also conducted documentary analysis. One project explored differences in feedback experiences between students of different abilities (as measured by mean and range

of marks), another investigated differences in experiences between students who were native and non-native speakers. For the remaining two the focus was on comparing staff and student views. Approaches to the projects varied but all generated qualitative data, using semi-structured interviews, to explore the experiences of the participants and the meaning they made of these (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

To ensure consistency, and allow for data to be aggregated across projects, common interview questions were agreed and asked in all interviews, alongside other more specific ones relating to each individual project. The common questions were agreed by the team and included: What kind of feedback have you experienced on this programme? What kind of feedback do you find most useful in supporting your learning? What do you think the purpose of feedback is? Do you use feedback from one assignment when preparing for another, and if so in what way? What do you do if you encounter some difficulty with your academic work?

British Educational Research Association Ethical guidelines (BERA 2011) were followed, with consent for analysis of aggregated data reported in this paper also received. Approval was granted from the Faculty Ethics Committee. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Three programmes were selected for the study. To preserve confidentiality these are referred to as: MSc Art and Instruction (AI); MSc Operational Thinking (OT); and MSc Informal Pedagogy (IP). They were selected because they:

- were a similar size (between 10 and 20 students on each);
- represented a diversity of fields of study,
- had a similar balance of Home/ EU and Overseas students.

All programmes followed the university regulations in providing mid-term formative feedback as well as feedback (both formative and justifying the grade) on final summative assessment tasks. Two of the programmes (OT and IP) had been exploring alternative approaches to feedback on formative and summative assessment with the aim of increasing student engagement with feedback. The MSc AI was following more standard assessment and feedback practices (mid-term formative feedback and summative assessment based on 100% course work). All students enrolled on the selected programmes were invited to participate via email (n=49). All interviews took place between April and July 2017.

Details of interview participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Programmes, Student Numbers and Fee Status

	Students on Programme	Students interviewed			Fee Status
		Total	F	M	
Art and Instruction	18	12	8	4	7 Home/EU 5 Overseas
Operational Thinking	14	8	4	4	4 Home/EU 4 Overseas
Informal Pedagogy	17	7	4*	3	4 Home/ EU 3 Overseas
TOTAL	49	27	16	11	15 Home/EU 12 Overseas

*One part-time student, all others full-time. All on campus.

Thematic analysis of the entire data set was carried out by Author 1 and 2 to identify patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Transcripts were coded manually to condense the data then similar ideas were identified to create categories (Saldaña 2009). Codes were both derived from literature and emerged from the data. A coding framework was constructed to maximise consistency across coders, and to facilitate consideration of themes emerging across codes. The categories used and related codes are shown in Table 2. Many of the strategies advocated by Nowell et al. (2017) to ensure trustworthiness were

utilised including: documenting theoretical and reflective thoughts, researcher triangulation, regular peer debriefing, and team consensus.

Table 2: Three programmes as activity systems

	Art and Instruction	Operational Thinking	Informal Pedagogy
Subject	Student	Student	Student
Object	Good grades	Learning and development	To have a sense of one's own development
Mediating tool	Written feedback that arrives in time to be used by student	Sense of being Master's students	Feedback as a dialogue within ongoing pedagogic relationships
Rules and Conventions	Lecturers know more than students	Staff are busy: don't disturb	Staff are busy but prioritise students at specific times
	Students should reproduce what lecturer wants	Students should take responsibility	Structured assessment and feedback process
	Don't disturb busy staff		Staff and students work together
Community	Staff and students	Mostly students	Mostly staff
Division of Labour	Staff create feedback 'product'; students 'consume' it	Work is shared between students	Shared, ongoing, dialogue between staff and students
	Staff are dominant	Staff seem mostly absent	Staff lead through 'softer' power
Outcome	Relatively dependent students.	Greater sense of agency / independence.	Focus on learning dialogue and emergent sense of agency but continued reliance on staff
	Feedback seen as commodity.		

The aim of this study was to identify the particular experiences of a number of students and to analyse these in the light of current understanding to generate insights which may be of relevance to a wider population. While a participant group of 27 was large enough to draw out patterns in the data with a degree of confidence, we make no claims to the representativeness of the student participants and therefore no claims to statistical generalizability (Yin 1994). The nature of the study design (a single-shot rather than

longitudinal study in the real-world context) did not allow for pre-or post- test measures, for example of student independence, neither were we able to control all variables. We therefore make no claims to have uncovered causal relationships between feedback, relationships and independence; indeed, we contend that relationships between these factors are likely to be complex and not linear. What we have identified are connections which we believe warrant further exploration. A strength of the design is that as the data were generated by student-researchers with 'insider' status (Kanuha 2000), the likelihood of interviewees speaking frankly about their experiences was increased.

Framework for analysis

Because early stages of the thematic analysis pointed to the importance of context, and that we understand feedback to be a process that is dialogic, social and occurring within a wider set of relationships, we adopted Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström 2001) as an analytic tool. This allowed us to understand individuals' experience of assessment and feedback in the social and cultural context of their programmes of study rather than as a relatively separate linear process. The intellectual roots of CHAT are in Vygotsky's (1930/ 1994) idea that individual human activity is mediated through the use of tools and artefacts such as language and physical objects (Henley 2015). These tools carry meaning and are interpreted by individuals within specific contexts (in this case programmes) and can connect the individual with their physical and social environment. This mediated activity occurs within an immediate context (an activity system) that is social, in that the context includes others, and has an associated set of practices and ways of thinking and doing that can be seen as a small-scale culture.

In Figure 1, a generic activity system model shows relationships between the individual and their immediate social context. The inner triangle deals with the relations between individuals, their activity and the community in which this takes place.

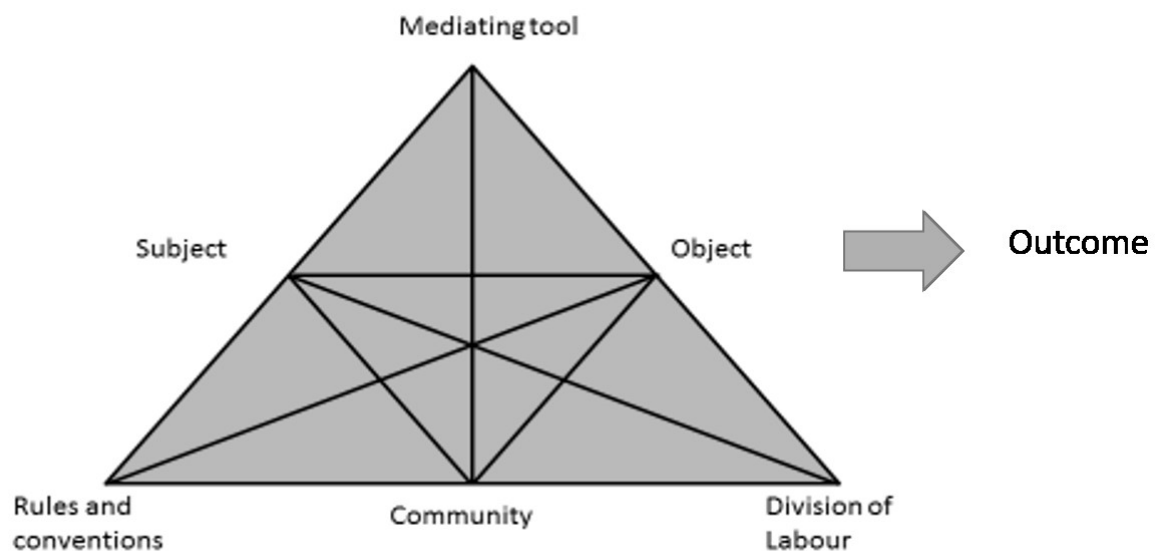


Figure 1: Generic activity system (Engeström 2001)

The connections between the six points should not be seen as static but more as a relational flow in both directions. As a result, the system is more dynamic and also open to contradictions and tensions than the diagram might imply. Looking at individual activity in this kind of context does not separate individual cognition from the sociocultural context in which it occurs but sees the individual and the immediate sociocultural context as happening in relation to each other.

The ‘subject’ represents individuals operating in the activity system, in this case students. The ‘object’ is what they appear to be trying to achieve through their activity. The outcome is what actually happens. For example, the object might be to gain high marks, become more proficient as a professional, or to learn more. The ‘community’ point on the diagram represents the other members of the activity system such as fellow students and teaching

staff. The ‘division of labour’ highlights how different roles are taken in the activity system. For students this might be taking on a role as a learner and doing assignments. For staff this might be imparting knowledge, advice and also marking the students’ work and writing feedback. There are also ‘rules and conventions’ within the system that can be implicit or explicit. For example, there will be explicit regulatory requirements for students’ work, while implicit rules might include things like taking turns to make tea. Each system also has ‘mediating tools’. These can be physical (e.g. computers), or conceptual (e.g. mnemonic techniques). For example, feedback itself (dialogic and as a ‘commodity’), can be seen as a mediating tool and engagement as ‘distributed’ across other elements such as division of labour and rules and conventions. A summary of the CHAT-based interpretation for each programme can be seen in Table 3 at the end of the following section.

Findings

The aim of the study was to identify practices and contexts which Master’s students experienced as supporting their engagement with feedback and developing their independence as learners.

Programme 1: Art and Instruction

This programme followed standard assessment and feedback practices common across the Faculty. All but one of the students understood feedback in a traditional sense as comments provided to them on the basis of a final piece of work. Laura’s explanation was representative ‘*We had to do an assignment and we got feedback on that.*’. Only Cat talked about feedback in a more dialogic sense, as part of a seminar discussion:

Tutors would ask our views on a topic ... and then the tutor would, sort of guide through, and that was the feedback as well.

Students believed lecturers knew what they needed to produce and that the function of feedback was for lecturers to convey clear instructions about what was required of them. Students judged the quality of the feedback by the extent to which it enabled them to understand what the lecturers wanted in order to achieve a good mark. Timing of feedback was also important: students needed it in time to be used in the next assignment. The prime importance attached by the students to lecturers' views on their work is illustrated in that although seven students identified informal peer feedback as part of their learning experience, of these, most said they did not find it at all useful and that they preferred to receive feedback from the expert lecturers.

Seven students recalled having been invited to have a 1:1 chat about their work with a member of staff, but four did not take up this opportunity, with three of them citing the busyness of staff. Molly said:

It is not necessarily something I could go to [lecturer's name] being like I am really struggling with this, can you help me? Because my understanding [is] she doesn't have the time.

From one student there was a suspicion that lecturers were deliberately limiting their availability:

And I think they make a point of kind of a not helping you, even if they could, because they want you to develop independently as a student in research. (Mylan)

Although ten students viewed the feedback they received at postgraduate taught level as more detailed and more extensive than that which they had received during their undergraduate

studies, they reported that their experiences overall were similar to those they had as undergraduates. There were two exceptions, students who had taken first degrees in North American universities, both of whom talked about their expectations not being met, their experience of feedback being worse than during their undergraduate studies, particularly in terms of class contact time and opportunities to interact with staff. Brianne was one of these and she described how she used input from lecturers:

And mostly if you are not completely 100% sure about something, go and ask the lecturer before you turn in the assessment.

Here we can see that where students did mention talking with lecturers the sense is still one of an expert passing on knowledge, so we still see feedback as a commodity in these cases.

In activity theory terms the student subject uses the mediation tool of tutor-provided feedback in order to work out what the lecturer wants to see in the next piece of work with the object of getting a high(er) mark. The objective is focused on grade not learning, (although there may be an assumption that a high grade equals good learning). This occurs within a community with rules and conventions that do not encourage teacher-student dialogue, (such as ‘don’t disturb the busy lecturers’, ‘lecturer knowledge is better than student generated knowledge’), with a very clear division of labour, (students produce assignments, lecturers give marks and feedback, students use feedback). Overall, there is a sense of dependence on staff for feedback information, sometimes in lieu of face to face discussion.

Programme 2: Operational Thinking

The MSc OT programme team were developing their feedback practice. As part of this they had introduced student feedback groups. In small groups students were asked to read and

rank (against criteria) all of the assignments that had been submitted by group members. Each student and the tutor then shared their individual ranking and any differences in outcome were discussed. The aim was to help students become familiar with the assessment criteria and how these would be applied.

However, in the student accounts of their feedback experience these feedback tutorials were not highlighted. No one mentioned them unprompted, although all remembered when specifically asked about them. In contrast, seven talked without prompting about an informal peer support network that they had developed without any involvement of staff and saw this as very important to their learning experience.

All emphasised the role of feedback in developing their thinking. All said they preferred feedback which focused on their ideas rather than on the structure of their writing. In line with this, and unlike students on MSc AI, receiving feedback quickly was viewed as less important than receiving in-depth feedback. Where there was similarity with the MSc AI students it was in relation to the perception of the programme teaching staff as being very busy. All eight students mentioned this as an issue for their programme, for example:

I would like to have a conversation about my work with the lecturers but I think right now they don't have the time, the energy or the interest to go at that level. (Sam)

Like Mylan from the MSc AI, Maria thought the lack of availability of staff was deliberate, and she interpreted this positively as a sign that the lecturers had confidence in the students' ability to work independently:

So it was the right amount of direction and letting us struggle on our own. I think that was really important.

The students responded to this lack of direct contact with staff by setting up a peer support group. This corresponds with the emphasis placed by these students on their responsibility for their own learning. For example, Andy reported that:

Apart from the feedback given by [lecturer's name], I also sought feedback through other means... Comparing my writing to maybe recommendations online like the things that people look for.

The peer group was described by all but one of the eight students as being a positive aspect of their learning experience, for example, John experienced a strong sense of belonging to the group:

I was thankful enough to be part of the group that was really...I felt tight knit and we were open with each other.

However, what students would really have liked was the opportunity to have the kinds of conversations they had with peers in the group, but with the staff.

Like I said the dialogue with staff is most beneficial to me...and I know that's probably not realistic in the time scale...but what I would really appreciate more would be if we had a bit more time ...devoted to how I am thinking. (Oliver)

Keisha identified some challenges with the peer group, implying that she would rather hear the 'correct' answer from staff, but again demonstrating a sense of responsibility for her own learning:

It should be our personal responsibility to choose what to take from the discussions with peers. It is because it can give multiple views and that may not always be helpful.

This was an interesting programme in that the outcomes for the students can be seen in Activity Theory terms as increased agency through a focus on learning and development where the relationship with lecturers is distanced. There is a sense of a collective realisation

by the students that they were not going to get high quality feedback or interaction from the lecturers so they would have to do this themselves. They did this by forming their own peer group support. This seems to have been mediated by the idea of being ‘Master’s students’ who should be independent. This idea can be seen as a tool that changes the rules to ‘students need to generate the feedback’ and narrows the division of labour with students sharing out the work between themselves, with staff largely absent. The outcome of increased agency and development is in sharp contrast to the dependent state of the students on the MSc AI programmes.

Programme 3: Informal Pedagogy

Although the MSc IP complied with the standard ‘taught followed by research’ structure, the individual courses were sequential rather than concurrent, with each being delivered over an intensive period of a week. This was to accommodate a number of off-campus residential trips and other practical activities. One of the teaching team was trialling different approaches to assessment and feedback, including giving feedback first and asking for a student response to it, before releasing the grade. This programme runs over 15 months and at the time of data-collection the students had five months remaining, unlike those on AI and OT who had only two or three months left.

The accounts of the students on this programme about their learning experiences were quite different to those of students on the other programmes. First, when asked to talk about assessment and feedback their responses focused not on the assessment practices, but on the programme culture and the relationships they had with teaching staff.

Angela said, ‘*The Faculty are a huger factor*’ and of one member of staff in particular:

He has got a massive array of experience that he brings to air as a teacher, and you can tell that despite all his vast experience he has a really distinct passion for teaching and he brings kind of a level of holistic instruction to the course...so I think his instruction in particular is kind of vital.

For Lisa, it was seeing the lecturers demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the practical sessions that generated trust and faith in them, making her more likely to listen to their views on her academic work. Julie had a similar view, but added that in addition to seeing staff as experts:

Feedback that I trust and I value is mostly I would say from people I have built up a relationship with.

This sense of feedback as ongoing dialogue within a relationship came through all the interviews. For example, Angela reflected,

There's something about having an ongoing conversation about the work you are doing and the assignment you are doing and reflecting and bouncing ideas back and forth, it feels much more like academic discourse.

The students' experiences of having a strong relationship with lecturers was achieved despite their awareness that the teaching staff were very busy. One observed that all the lecturers have 'lots of hats' that they wear – some of them in the wider university although one had 'lots of hats everywhere'. Despite this, Angela said,

I have never got a sense from any of these instructors that the instruction and the interaction was anything less than top priority and I think they go out of their way to make that clear.

The second main difference was that these students all understood assessment and feedback as an integral part of their learning, and they attributed this to the deliberate actions of the

lecturers. Julie talked about very explicit instructions about how assessment and feedback were used on the programme and Angela agreed that there was:

...a distinct effort made to make it clear that the assignment was something you would learn a lot from as part of the course.

Elizabeth talked about how this started with the first course on which grades were withheld until students have responded to comments:

He goes like, “only you care about the marks, I don’t. And what matters to me most is that you learn through the comments that I have made”.

And Julie noted how this had set the scene for the entire programme, saying *‘I think it has had an effect on how I have looked at feedback since then.*

A third point of departure with the students on other programmes was the lack of comments about learning from peers, which sits slightly at odds with the overall impression of a programme for which community and relationships are central. There are some passing mentions of feedback being given to a group, and of feedback between peers on practical activities where they worked in pairs:

We give each other ideas and advice for doing things in different ways and all that kind of thing. (Julie)

However, none of the students on this programme talked about learning from their peers in terms of the academic content of their studies, and for the most part other students were absent from their discussions about their learning experiences. On this programme, the key relationships were between staff and students and at the time of the data collection the MSc IP students presented as still somewhat dependent on their lecturers. One explanation for this may be the unusually high esteem in which the tutors were held. Julie described them as ‘very

influential in the field’ and *‘inspiring’* while for Lisa the appeal was that they also excelled in practical activities, reporting that *‘they are all completely badass’*. Elizabeth talked about a future expedition being *‘the first one without our leaders, so it will be make or break’* suggesting anxiety about being left alone, but at the same time recognising that this was the next step in their learning.

The idea of programme appears in the interviews in a very clear way. There was an emphasis on students gaining understanding of what is expected of them. This enables students to have a sense of place, a *‘more accurate notion of where you stood’* (Angela) in relation to the programme and associated assessment. There seemed to be alignment in terms of teaching, work required, and the assessment and feedback experience that was experienced as coherent by the students.

In Activity Theory terms, the object of activity is learning and developing understanding about themselves as learners. Feedback is much less of a tool and more of a process than in the other programmes. The structured approach to feedback acts as a mediating tool that facilitates dialogue rather than being a *‘commodity’* in itself. There are clear rules and conventions (rules in that there is a structured approach to feedback, conventions in terms of wider dialogue and accessibility of staff). Feedback as an activity can be seen as distributed across rules and conventions (both in terms of feedback structure and the general pedagogic *‘culture’* of the programme), community and division of labour. The division of labour part of the system is less rigidly defined than in some of the other programmes. We also sense that the developmental object may facilitate an outcome of greater agency and independence as a learner that could be seen as distinct from UG study and associated with *‘Mastersness’*.

While the students are not necessarily independent experts when they begin, they *may*

become much more so through their participation, particularly as they have more time remaining on programme.

A summary of the analysis of each programme as an activity system is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Programmes as activity systems

	Art and Instruction	Operational Thinking	Informal Pedagogy
Subject	Student	Student	Student
Object	Good grades	Learning and development	To have a sense of one's own development
Mediating tool	Written feedback that arrives in time to be used by student	Sense of being Master's students	Feedback as a dialogue within ongoing pedagogic relationships
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Community	Staff and students	Mostly students	Mostly staff
Division of Labour	Staff create feedback 'product'; students 'consume' it Staff are dominant	Work is shared between students Staff seem mostly absent	Shared, ongoing, dialogue between staff and students Staff lead through 'softer' power
Outcome	Relatively dependent students. Feedback seen as commodity.	Greater sense of agency / independence.	Focus on learning dialogue and emergent sense of agency but continued reliance on staff

Discussion and Conclusion

This study identified that assessment practices, programme culture and relationships all shape students' engagement with feedback and independence in different and not always predictable ways. Some characteristics of the three programmes are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Characteristics of programmes

	Staff/student relationships	Independence of learners	Peer feedback	Feedback is
Informal Pedagogy	close	low (but developing)	less valued	dialogic
Operational Thinking	distant	high	highly valued	dialogic with peers
Art and Instruction	distant	low	not valued	a commodity

In contrast to what might be expected from the literature, the most active, dialogic feedback practice between staff and students was not associated with the most independent and self-regulating learners. Our findings show that there was something of a trade-off between developing the kinds of staff-student relationships in which dialogic feedback flourished, and reported levels of student independence.

The approach of the IP programme is one of promoting sustainable feedback (Hounsell 2007) in which the emphasis is on capacity building over time. The intensity of the programme (week-long courses, residential field trips, expeditions) and respect for the academic and professional competence of staff (*'completely badass'*) led to continuing close proactive interaction which appeared to be associated with greater student dependency than might be expected on a programme with such a focus on feedback as ongoing dialogue, and a commitment to transparency around feedback practices. This fits with Boud and Molloy's caution that, 'the perceived high status of the teacher may inhibit students' own self-evaluation of performance' (2013, 709). However, what was evident from these students was a commitment to developing their understanding of themselves as learners, rather than any concern with grades. The slightly

longer length of programme may provide the space necessary to move students towards greater independence. The constraints of time on standard 1-year programmes (Coates and Dickinson 2012) may limit the transferability of the IP programme's approach.

The most independent students were on the programme on which, while there was respect for staff as academics, the relationships were quite distant. These students barely mentioned the feedback strategy implemented by their programme team. This strategy related to the first two of Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick's (2006) seven principles underpinning good feedback: clarifying performance and developing self-assessment. Although the students did not attribute the development of their peer feedback group to this initiative, it seems reasonable to suppose that this group would not have been the success it clearly was without this preparation. Indeed, the OT approach can be seen as responding to Boud and Molloy's call to reposition feedback as, 'teachers become designers and sustainers of the learning milieu; establishing conditions in which students can operate with agency.' (2013, 710). What is slightly unusual about this programme is that it appeared to be successful in promoting engagement and independence without fostering interactions between students and staff. As such the relational dimension of feedback (Price et al. 2010) is not between students and staff but between students and their peers.

As well as the complex relationships between independence and close relationships in which active dialogic feedback can flourish, our study also found a trade-off between peer feedback and feedback from staff. While we found good examples of both, there was no programme on which both were evident. Where there was sustained dialogue between staff and students on IP, there was no sense of students learning from each other in relation to their academic work. This may be a factor contributing to the surprisingly low level of independence in the IP students, as Nicol (2010) suggests, peer feedback is an effective way to 'helping students

become more detached and critical about their own work.’ (Nicol 2010, 509). For almost all the students on the MSc OT, peer feedback was a central part of their learning experience. However, this only happened because they felt they were not getting what they needed from staff, and as McConlogue (2015) found, despite the success of the peer feedback, many of these students said they would prefer to have feedback from the ‘experts’. Our study therefore suggests that it may be challenging to get students to engage with peer feedback where they are also experiencing active dialogic feedback with staff. This is a concern as the evidence shows the advantage of multiple sources of feedback (Boud and Molloy 2013)

A programme culture and practice that reinforced dependence was seen in the MSc AI. As in Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit (2010), these students felt abandoned by staff, and experienced being treated as independent learners as being left alone to work things out for themselves. Rather predictably this strategy had the opposite effect and actually increased dependence as, in the absence of information, students focused all their attention on trying to work out what the staff wanted from them. The accounts from students on this programme are consistent with a relative lack of feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018) in that they tended to view feedback as a commodity not a process, were more dependent on judgements from teaching staff which seemed to restrict their scope for taking action, Accounts from the other two programmes are consistent with higher levels of feedback literacy. We cannot be certain that the reason behind the very different experiences of the AI and OT students, in what appeared to be relatively similar contexts, was the calibration mechanism strategy of OT. There may have been other factors, including of course the students themselves.

However, we can say that in the absence of such a strategy, or other structures to develop students’ capacity, the negative experiences of the AI students seem likely to be replicated. We can also say that the differences we found between the programmes can be explained in relation to differences in features interpreted from the different programme activity systems.

This demonstrates the importance of understanding MSc students as on a journey towards ‘Mastersness’, rather than as students who start their programme with these characteristics.

In conclusion, our findings show that some programme cultures and practices are associated with promoting independence, while others promote dependence. We found that although relationships are undoubtedly important the connection between relationships and development of independence is problematic. This may have implications for arguments around optimal amounts of contact time as it seems that more is not always going to mean better. Our study also suggests that care needs to be taken in balancing peer and staff feedback so that students have access to and can see value in both. Finally, our research indicates that there are risks involved in treating Master’s students as independent and ‘expert’ students from the start of their programmes.

There is clearly no simple ‘recipe’ for engaged and independent Master’s students which would work in every setting. We suggest that staff wishing to enhance the assessment and learning on their programmes should look at the specific relationships and culture prevailing and how this may influence pedagogical relationships. We have shown that Activity Theory is useful as a relatively simple interpretive framework in understating participants’ experiencers of feedback within their social-cultural context of their programmes. We suggest this can be used to understand similar relationships in other programmes and is likely to be of use in understanding the perspectives of both staff and students in a single programme one way of exploring these dimensions. One size definitely doesn’t fit all (Shute 2008) but more ‘bespoke’ solutions can be found.

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